Building Social Community in the Classroom

Your first task in working with a new group of students is to set the affective tone of the classroom. How you respond to students and how you expect students to respond to you and each other affect the classroom community. You need to *model* the behaviors you expect from students. For example:

- Model good listening behavior by focusing on the speaker and responding to the speaker.
- Accept what your students say and help them understand their feelings.
- When students have problems, help them clarify and resolve them.

When problems are not of a personal nature, call attention to them and encourage good listening behavior. "Jerry, has a problem; let's hear about it and see if we can help." When another student suggests alternatives, give positive feedback to the speaker, thereby encouraging others to listen and make suggestions.

Role-play is another way to dramatize respectful, attentive listening behavior. Call attention to an obvious classroom problem. Suppose the students all need to use dictionaries, but there are not enough to go around. "What can we do about this problem? Let's all stop working for a moment and think this out. Arnoldo, what will you do when you need to use the dictionary but can't find one?" Encourage several students to role-play appropriate social behavior. Then tell the students to go back to work.

When you see students performing just as they were asked to do, provide positive *feedback* so that all the students hear it and are encouraged to continue positive social behavior. At the end of the work period compliment the students for working out the problem.

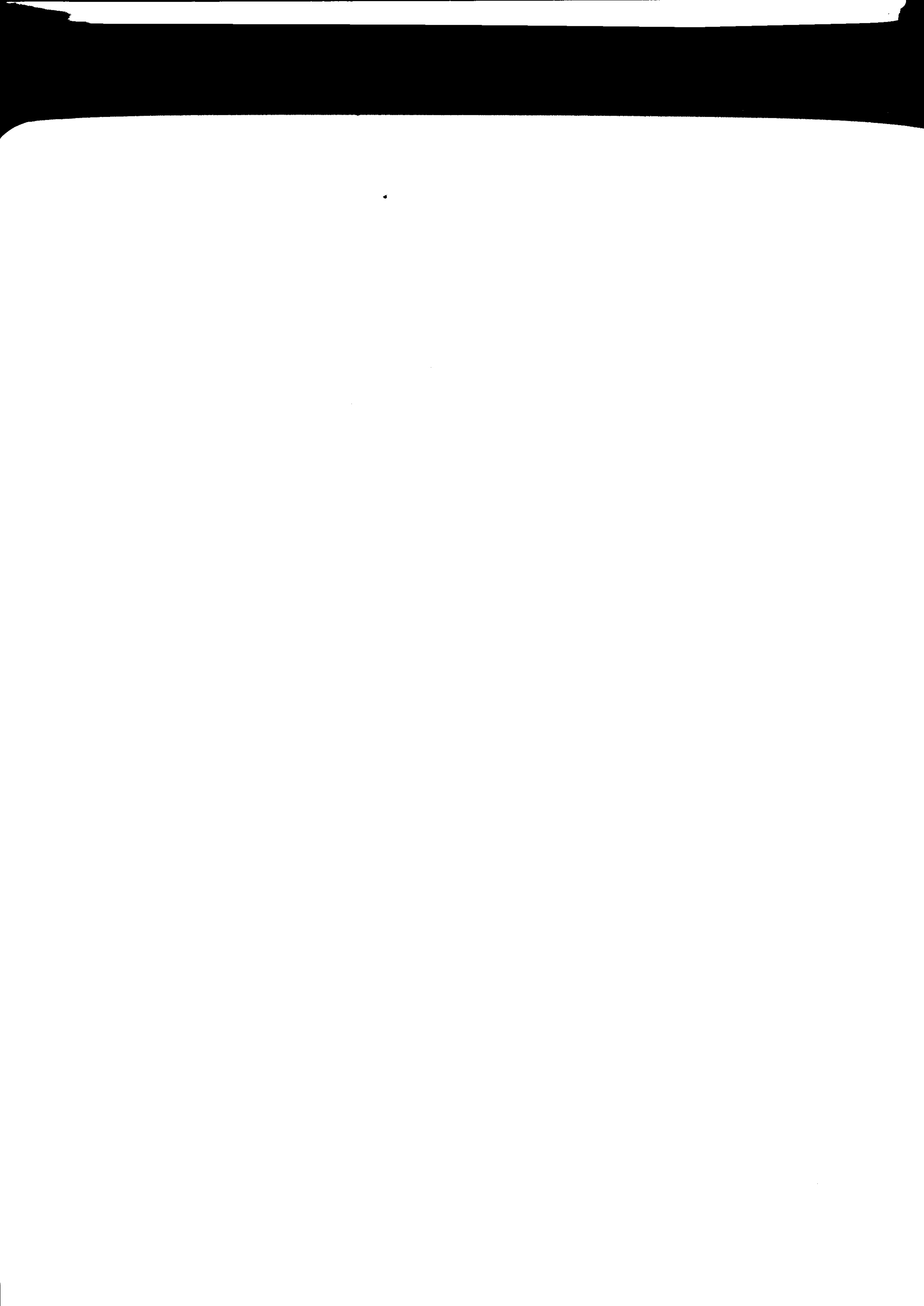
Positive feedback reinforces appropriate behavior, but it is not enough to do this sporadically. Students need to *practice* responding respectfully to each other. "Remember how we had to share the dictionaries yesterday? Today we have a similar problem to deal with. Let me tell you about it." Repeated practice of appropriate social behavior serves as *reinforcement*, but you need to call attention to the problem and the expected responses.

The same ideas can be used for situations that involve problems between students (a fight), disagreements on the playground, or learning a skill. For example: Rima and Jean shared a hall locker. Rima gave the combination to another student and Jean became very angry. They were screaming at each other and beginning physical contact when they were stopped by their homeroom teacher. The teacher suggested that they each sit down, think about the situation, and come up with ideas for dealing with the problem. After about seven minutes the teacher brought the two students together and asked them about their alternatives. The students had calmed down, thought about their options, and came up with several solutions. Now the teacher asked them if she might ask other students to consider the problem. They agreed, and the teacher confronted the class.

Using Rima and Jean's problem, the teacher had several students "act it out." The class as a whole evaluated the role-play and suggested additional alternatives. The problem was reenacted and finally Rima and Jean were asked to tell the class what they considered to be the "best" solution. During each step of the way the students and the teacher were providing feedback, practice, and reinforcing appropriate behavior.

Peer relationships are a critical element in the socialization process, but schools often operate as if students only interact with adults. This is an "adult-centric" view of life. In some classrooms teachers spend an inordinate amount of energy attempting to prevent student-to-student interaction. Yet peer relationships contribute to both socialization and social and cognitive development. Johnson and Johnson (1983) report that students' interaction facilitates the learning of attitudes, values, skills, and information not typically obtainable from adults. Through interaction students imitate each other's behavior. Using peers as models, students receive reinforcement and direct learning. Peer models shape social behavior, attitudes, and perspectives. Interaction with peers may provide opportunities for learning prosocial behavior. Johnson and Johnson (1996) suggest that peer relationships should be structured by teachers to promote constructive goals:

1. Plan situations in which students will work together to achieve a common goal.
2. Focus on group product rather than individual products.
3. Teach interpersonal skills (group skills).
4. Structure the situation so that students have responsibilities for the success of the group and each other.
5. Encourage support, acceptance, concern, and commitment by all members of the group.
6. Hold members of the group accountable for group actions; members are responsible to and for each other.
7. Ensure that students are successful in their group work.



(See chapter 2 for suggestions on beginning and managing group work.)

Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist (1897–1934), theorized that there is a relationship between language development and social development. Implications of his theories suggest that teachers need to encourage social interaction in the classroom, particularly between older and younger students and between more capable and less capable students.

Citizenship skills can be developed and maintained by fostering cooperative behaviors and by modeling appropriate behavior through teacher-student interactions. A number of key teacher behaviors will be discussed.

—What teacher behaviors foster a positive classroom community?—

CONSISTENCY AND EQUITY

Mr. Hannibal rarely gives Paul time to respond during a classroom discussion. The consequence of this behavior is that Paul does not try to respond when he is called on, and his classmates become more eager to compete for Paul's response time.

TEACHER: Paul, can you tell us why the Netsilik Eskimos migrate?
PAUL: Um-mmm-mmm . . .
KATHY: Mr. Hannibal, Mr. Hannibal, I know.
JEAN: *(Waving her hand in the air)* It's because they're . . .
TEACHER: Well, all right, Kathy, you tell us.

Another version of the same discussion could have had more productive results:

TEACHER: Paul, can you tell us why the Netsilik Eskimos migrate? *(Long pause)*
TEACHER: Paul, do you recall some reasons why animals migrate?
PAUL: Oh, yes! Animals migrate when they need food or if the weather isn't right for them. Oh, I remember, the Netsiliks migrate . . .

In the second sequence the teacher waited for Paul to respond. After several seconds the teacher gave Paul a content clue that helped him to recall what he knew about migration and to compare animal and human migration patterns.

Analysis of the two instructional patterns provides several significant bits of information to think about. Mr. Hannibal waited several seconds before giving Paul a content clue; research by Rowe (1974) indicated that most teachers wait only one second before calling on another student or else answering the question themselves. Yet students' participation, interaction, involvement, and creativeness increase when teachers, using the technique of teacher silence, wait several seconds (three to five) before providing additional clues or calling on another student. Wallen (1966) discovered that cognitive achievement also increases when teachers accept students' statements by using, extending, summarizing, or clarifying them.

Still to be discussed is what happens in a classroom when a teacher selectively provides some students with content clues (or is silent for a period of time to allow them time to reflect) but cuts off other students consistently. Indirectly, the teacher's behavior toward the second group can affect (a) the students' motivation to respond; (b) their self-concept, based on the teacher's nonverbal lack of acceptance; and (c) the students' level of aspiration. In the first sequence, Mr. Hannibal's behavior encouraged impatience and lack of reflectiveness in the other children.

This discussion focuses on the instructional implications of inconsistency. It is important to recognize that whenever teachers are inconsistent in their responses to students, ultimately it affects classroom behavior. Suppose that Mr. Hannibal expects students to work quietly without talking to neighbors while doing practice assignments, but that there is a favored group of students who are able to communicate with each other without being penalized. The obvious inconsistency will affect the behavior of other students. Inconsistency occurs when teachers interpret classroom rules differentially or provide inequitable cues or responses to students. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 provide checklists to monitor your classroom behavior.

CLARITY

Principals frequently tell of visiting classrooms and asking students, "What are you supposed to be doing?" and the students too often responding, "We don't know." The principals are not telling tales and the students are not dumb. What, then, is the problem? Fuzzy and imprecise language is the villain. Students want and need to know what, how, and why. In order to perform individually or in a group assignment, students must understand what they are supposed to do. Most classroom activities require some degree of structuring in terms of the goal, time

limitation, who is to do what, quality requirements, and the use of materials.

Table 1.1. Checklist for Elementary Awareness-Consistency

1. Without looking at your roll book, can you name all the children in your classroom?
2. If you were unable to name all of the children, whom did you forget? Do these forgotten children have any characteristic in common?
3. Can you name the children who always contribute to a discussion?
4. Can you name the children who rarely contribute to a discussion?
5. What efforts can you make to encourage children to contribute to a discussion?*
6. Your students have turned in work papers or projects. Identify some ways that you can demonstrate awareness to your students.*
7. When an individual student's performance varies from his or her typical work, what do you do?*
8. Do you spend more time with some children than with others? Do you have an instructional purpose for doing so?
9. Do you remember to praise good performance based on individual differences? (Do only certain children get praised?)
10. Do you repeat directions, when requested, for all children?
11. Do you tend to "close out" certain children with discouraging responses?

*Some possible suggestions:

5. Make a habit of calling on many children, not a certain few. Give each child the same amount of time to respond (5 seconds).
6. Talk to each student personally when you return the work; write a personal statement to each child; return the work promptly; discuss the importance and relevance of the work to ongoing activities.
7. Talk to the child individually; inquire if the child is "satisfied" with personal progress; express concern.

Table 1.2. Checklist for Secondary Awareness-Consistency

1. Use your roll book and select one group (class) of students. Can you remember something about each of the students? If you cannot remember something specific about each student, the next time class meets, see if the students you forgot have a common characteristic.
2. Using the same class of students, can you name the students who always contribute to a discussion?
3. Which students rarely contribute to a discussion?
4. What efforts can you make to encourage students to contribute to a discussion?*
5. Your students turn in work papers, homework, and projects. Identify some ways that you can demonstrate awareness to your students.*
6. When an individual student's performance varies from his or her typical work, what do you do?*
7. Do you spend more time with some students than with others? Do you have an instructional purpose for doing so?
8. Do you remember to praise good performance based on individual differences? (Do only certain students get praised?)
9. Do you repeat directions, when requested, for all students?
10. Do you tend to "close out" certain students with discouraging responses?

* Some possible suggestions:

4. Call on students even if they do not volunteer. Encourage students to talk to each other rather than to you. Be noncommittal in your response and refer the question to others for further discussion. Give each student the same amount of time to respond.
5. Talk to each student personally when you return the work; write a personal statement to each student; return the work promptly and discuss the importance and relevance of the work to ongoing activities in the classroom.
6. Express concern about the student's performance to him or her personally; ask the student to explain the inconsistent performance.

If teachers use imprecise language ("Boys and girls, make a time line beginning when your parents were children.") or give an assignment without verifying that the children understand it, misbehavior and confusion are the invariable consequences. Kounin (1970) verified that student behavior is affected by the clarity of the language teachers use to give directions to students before they begin work. The checklist in table 1.3 will help you to give clear directions to your students.

Table 1.3. Checklist for Giving Directions and Assignments

1. Establish eye contact. (Ask students to look at you.)
2. Scan class to verify that students are not performing another task. (Remind students to put everything out of their hands, such as pencils, books, blocks, etc.).
3. Lower your voice to make students focus on what you are saying.
4. Speak clearly.
5. Give concise directions.
6. Verify student understanding through one or more of the following:
   a. Ask one or more students to repeat directions.
   b. Ask if anyone has a question.
   c. Monitor students' initial efforts if they are to perform a task.
7. Rephrase directions if students do not understand.

Giving directions that are precise and clearly stated takes practice. A good way to check on the clarity of your directions is to ask several students to repeat the instructions for an assignment. Then be prepared to sit back in shock as you discover the different perceptions the students have about what you thought you stated so clearly!

A related problem is the use of textbooks in social studies and science for reading assignments. Subject-matter textbooks are more difficult than basal reading textbooks for students. If the assignment is to be productive, then materials must be introduced to organize the reading so that students understand the author's purpose, to define unfamiliar concepts, and perhaps to suggest an outline for gathering data and answering questions. Ausubel (1963) suggested the need for **advance organizers** to structure what is to be learned. (The advance organizer teaching model will be demonstrated in chapter 6.)

Problems also occur during classroom discussion because class members are unsure of the purpose of the discussion or because the teacher, as the discussion leader, does not ask questions effectively. For students to take part in a classroom discussion, the purpose of the discussion must be understood; questions must elicit responses from many students; questions must be interesting and motivating; questions must be clearly stated so the listeners know what is being asked.

ACCEPTANCE AND RESPECT

For students to feel accepted, you must communicate interactive cues verbally or nonverbally. For instance, when a student looks up with an agonized expression while taking an examination, you can commiserate with the student through facial expressions, by walking over to the youngster and sitting next to him or her, and by whispering encouraging words, thereby communicating understanding. You may not necessarily agree with the student that the examination is difficult, but this has nothing to do with accepting the student's feelings. You might encourage continuation of the task through eye contact and a nod to the student. In these two examples the teacher is saying, "I understand how you feel." You need to resist the temptation to give a friendly pat on the shoulder; although this may be acceptable and encouraging for most children, in some cultures any form of touching is considered an affront.

For some time teachers have recognized that when students feel good about themselves, they are able to perform better in the classroom. A student's feelings of self-worth and self-esteem depend on the degree to which the child is aware of others' acceptance. A student's recognition of acceptance in the classroom by peers and teacher is related to practices that affect the self-concept. When teachers allow students to make decisions that affect them personally, they are letting the students know that there is trust in their joint relationship. When teachers communicate to students the acceptable boundaries for classroom behavior and proceed to carry through with the implementation of behavioral guidelines, then students have rational means by which to interpret personal actions. When a teacher plans for successful student performance, the students feel responsible to follow through, and they interpret the teacher's expectation as an affirmation of respect.

Sometimes a personal comment to a student will communicate your interest in the student as an individual. Similarly, during class or group discussions, teachers can consciously coordinate and extend students' ideas into statements or questions and ask others to reflect and share their ideas. In this instance you are demonstrating, "I listened." You are also modeling listening behavior that students will learn to imitate.

Accepting students' feelings and attitudes cannot be faked. Verbal or nonverbal body language betrays personal reactions to students. If you pay no attention to inappropriate behavior or a student's failing performance, it is tantamount to indifference. Instead of ignoring the student's failure or misbehavior, you can quietly confide to the student, "I expect you to do better," or "How can I help you?" With this type of

interaction, the student learns that the teacher sees, listens, and cares; the teacher is affirming the importance of the student.

PRAISE

Teachers frequently use praise to motivate and reinforce appropriate behavior, but it is important that praise be used for authentic academic accomplishments, not for insignificant or irrelevant tasks. When Juan, who typically fails to spend time on his math problems, develops a creative process for solving a math problem, he needs to be praised for his effort. It is important that Juan correlates his hard work (effort) to his accomplishment.

Elementary students perceive effort and ability as similar constructs; therefore, teachers' praise serves to enhance the elementary student's self-efficacy. Secondary students, however, recognize that effort and ability may be different constructs. The secondary student will question the sincerity of the teacher who praises effort and not accomplishment and may believe that the teacher has a low expectation of the student's ability.

> **TEACHING HINT**
>
> *Key Points: Praise*
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> Praise authentic accomplishments.
> Praise effort related to specific accomplishment(s).
> Help students relate success to effort and ability.
> Identify specifically what is praised and why it is praised.

MOTIVATION

Students' motivation for learning is affected by praise, the dynamics of the classroom, and instructional strategies. Currently, researchers are investigating students' perceptions about performing and completing learning tasks. Ames (1992) has differentiated between students who have a **mastery goal orientation** and students who have a **performance goal orientation**.

A mastery goal perception helps students value learning because it is fun and challenging. A performance goal perception leads to comparing personal performance with what others have accomplished. This results in students becoming anxious about the task to be performed and concerned about extrinsic rewards.

Ames suggests that teachers choose tasks that challenge, appeal to students' curiosity, and permit students to engage in decision making about the task. When a teacher provides areas of student choice and decision making, students become responsible for their own learning.

Bronkhurst (1995) studied the motivation of African-American and Latino high school students enrolled in high-achievement academic courses. He learned that successful students associate effort with academic success and develop a mastery-oriented learning style. He suggested that elementary, middle and high school teachers help students recognize the role of effort in academic achievement.

By recognizing both effort and accomplishment it is possible to help students see that making mistakes is both natural and helpful in learning. Mistakes are valuable in the learning process when they are used to convey direction, detect misunderstandings, and help students recognize how effort affects what is accomplished.

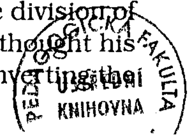
FIRMNESS

Kounin (1970) described the firmness dimension of more effective teachers as an "I mean it" factor. In his study of kindergarten children he found that firmness motivated conformity in children witnessing a teacher's firm behavior, whereas a teacher who treated children roughly or angrily produced disruptive behavior and emotionally upset children. Students' reactions to firmness appear to be consistent in both elementary and secondary education. It appears that a teacher cannot be firm without also being alert to students' needs, being aware of developmental progress, and being precise in language habits. Each of these dimensions adds to and facilitates the teacher's success with students, and each is dependent on the others in order to achieve good classroom management.

There are two important principles related to firmness that should be considered: Firm teacher behavior is related to the establishment of rational, enforceable rules; rules must be interpreted and enforced equitably for all children. Firmness is often communicated to students in the form of the teacher's expectations for student behavior and student accomplishments. Rule setting will be discussed in chapter 2.

FLEXIBILITY AND ADJUSTING TO STUDENTS' NEEDS

Teacher responsiveness to unexpected happenings is another way in which behavior is modeled for students. For example, a sixth-grade teacher discovered that his students did not understand the division of fractions. Since he had taught it earlier in the semester, he thought his students just needed to be reminded about the process of inverting the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divisor. When he had several students demonstrate problems on the chalkboard, he suddenly realized that they really had a basic learning problem. Instead of attempting to go on with the introduction of a new concept, he asked all of the students to work out a division problem on their papers. He checked their work individually and quickly divided the class into two groups. He introduced the new concept to the students who understood the division of fractions and then went to the cupboard and found some plastic models for the other students to work with so he could reteach the problem.

This teacher adjusted to a learning problem that suddenly emerged. He was prepared for it in the sense that he had classroom equipment that allowed him to use a multisensory approach to teaching mathematics. He was aware of the need to use a different strategy to reteach the subject. He diagnosed the problem and prescribed a new teaching objective. The teacher did not continue his original plan once he became cognizant of the new need; he adjusted work activities to student needs.

The development of flexibility in the use of teaching strategies can be the teacher's greatest asset. When confronted with a learning problem, teachers are forced to make some instant decisions concerning their teaching approach, the students' learning style, a new objective, work activity, use of materials, and time allotment. When teachers are unwilling to adjust their plans, they court disaster: If students are confused they will not stay on task, and this is when teachers have classroom management problems.

Unexpected events during the school day are normal in the course of teaching. For instance, just as you are about to clinch a learning experience, the fire bells begin to ring. Or equipment breaks down and spoils the lesson. Visitors, assemblies, the loudspeaker in the classroom, special personnel, all may represent unplanned happenings that require flexibility and adjustment.

Good classroom managers are consistent and equitable in the treatment of student behavior; they provide clear instructions; they are respectful of students (thereby generating respect from students); they provide encouragement and meaningful praise; they are rational and consistent in maintaining standards; and they adjust to both students' needs and unplanned school events. These behaviors promote positive teacher-student relationships and help students appreciate the teacher as model.

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